

Dear Members of the Children's Committee and General Assembly,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on S.B. 929: AN ACT EXPANDING SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS.

I understand the intent of the proposal. That said, my testimony will be on the technical components of the language specific to the following three areas: Effective Date, Scope Clarification, and Funding.

A. Effective Date: The effective date of July 1, 2023, if passed as such, would mean that all districts would have to be 100% funded by the state for the cost of covering all students meals who are not free or reduced meal eligible. Given the known variance between the legislative session and local budget processes, there is not an appropriation in the 2023-2024 budget to cover the costs of this bill since Board of Education budgets for the 2023-2024 school year have already moved on to town bodies, without this proposal included. To be budgeted for by a local or regional BOE for the 2023-2024 school year, this would have needed to have been passed last year or have an effective date of July 1, 2024.

B. Clarification on all students language lines 11-15: Who is "all students"?

"When such [services] programs are offered, a board shall provide free school lunches, school breakfasts or other such child feeding to [children whose economic needs require such action under the standards promulgated by said federal laws] all students. "

Can you please define "all students" in the bill? Is that all students by enrollment count in a district or is that all students who choose uptake on the meal(s) as a participant in the program? Are districts meant to provide the number of meals on the full count of enrollment OR for those who participate? There is a difference between the two and is unclear in the proposed language. To me, this reads IF you offer breakfast you will offer it for 100% of your enrollment count, as well as for lunch. If that is not the intent, I would ask that the language be clarified to what you mean. Mindful that "all students" for a district includes those who are homebound, those who are outplaced, those who are absent, and those who attend a choice program. Who is "all students"?

C. State Board of Education grants Lines 57-66:

- a. The proposed language does not state that 100% will be funded by the state, or any percentage, for all districts for the 2023-2024 school year, or any year thereafter. As previously mentioned, this is not appropriated for next year locally given the timeline you've proposed.
- b. When will said grants be disbursed? This is important to specify as most, if not all districts, have a contracted vendor who provide their food services and will of course want to be paid per their contract. The state would need to disburse the funding to align with vendor payment(s).
- c. Estimate of cost. For us, in Fairfield, the grant needed for the 2023-2024 school year to cover the paid portion is currently estimated at \$1.4 million.

While I understand the intent, there are operational and fiscal matters insufficiently addressed in the proposed language that pertain to the effective date, 100% to be covered for by the state - at least for next year - given budget timing, grant disbursement timing by the state in order to pay food services vendors, and greater clarification on the counts expected for each of the programs.

Outside of the proposed bill language, I would ask for a prioritization rationale on the resources this would require state wide given the diverse needs across our state, and other existing unfunded or not fully funded requirements such as excess cost, construction/HVAC, early childhood, early literacy, etc. when current meal eligibility thresholds are not met?

Thank you,
Jennifer Jacobsen
Fairfield